

TRAVEL

For gay couples, bonding in New England

By **Gary Lee**
 The Washington Post

The two brides from Massachusetts got dolled up in white and made their way down the staircase at the Highlands Inn, a guesthouse for women tucked away in the New Hampshire woods. Then, before a small gathering, they exchanged vows. The ceremony, which took place a few years ago, "was an occasion that left everyone in tears," recalled Highlands owner Grace Newman. "The only thing that it — and similar ceremonies — lacked was the blessing of the law."

But now that nearly all the New England states have made it possible for gay and lesbian couples to create legal bonds, such events are becoming commonplace across the region. At a time when legislatures in other parts of the country are slamming the door on gay marriage, the states clustered in the country's northeastern corner are becoming wildly popular for weddings, civil union ceremonies and honeymoons for gays.

The marriage alternative for gay men and lesbians, possible only in Massachusetts, gives the couples the same state rights offered to heterosexuals. Civil unions — available in Vermont, Connecticut and New Hampshire (starting this January) — allow couples a broad range of legal rights, but fewer than marriage provides. Domestic partnerships, offered in Maine, offer a more limited number of protections than civil unions. None of the

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states allows gays the federal legal rights granted to married heterosexuals.

However limited, these statutes nonetheless are giving a mega-boost to the region's allure among gay tourists.

Since same-sex marriage was legalized in 2004 in Massachusetts, attendance at Boston's annual Gay Pride Day, a major attraction for visitors, has more than doubled, according to the Massachusetts tourism bureau. Last June, attendance exceeded 100,000, compared with 40,000 three years ago. Although Vermont tourism officials don't tally visitors according to sexual orientation, several innkeepers report a strong rise in their gay clientele since civil unions were legalized in 2000.

"The status of gays has made an enormous, quantifiable difference in travel to the region," said Ed Salvato, editor of the OutTraveler, a gay-oriented magazine based in New York. "There has been a huge uptick of travelers visiting for ceremonies and bringing their entire entourages along."

Travelers who come for marriage or civil union ceremonies or honeymoons often build the trip around other New England attractions: Colonial history in Boston; the beach scene along Cape Cod; mountain hiking in New Hampshire; biking and nature escapes in Vermont.

The autumn foliage season — one of New England's biggest tourist draws — also attracts a strong contingent of gay travelers, according to Beth White, marketing communications director for the Massachusetts Office of Travel and Tourism. For his part, Salvato added that there's "a great gay-friendly leaf-peeping honeymoon scene all over that area."

Now more attention is turning to New Hampshire. In May, Gov. John Lynch signed a civil union statute. Although the law doesn't go into effect for a few more months, inns, wedding chapels and party planners statewide are already crafting civil union and honeymoon packages.

"We can serenade a ceremony with bagpipes, offer chauffeur-driven vintage cars or even arrange a ceremony at the top of the mountain," said Les Schoof, co-owner of the Notchland Inn, a deluxe guesthouse in Hart's Location that specializes in tailor-made wedding packages.

As far as the rest of the region goes, Massachusetts — New Hampshire's neighbor to the



south — is holding on to its distinction as the only state where gay couples can legally marry. The recent defeat of a proposed constitutional amendment banning gay marriage probably will continue to keep same-sex marriage legal in that socially progressive commonwealth for years to come.

In Vermont and Connecticut, where civil unions have been legal for several years, gay activists are pushing for marriage statutes. Rhode Island does not allow gay marriage or civil unions, but lawmakers are weighing a proposed gay marriage statute. In the meantime, the state sanctions marriages by same-sex couples in neighboring Massachusetts. Maine allows domestic partnerships for unmarried couples, including gays. New Jersey and California are the only states outside New England with broad civil union statutes.

"It's fitting that New England has taken on this pilgrimage status for gays and lesbians who want to celebrate their unions together," said Schoof, who runs the Notchland Inn with longtime partner Edward Butler. "We're socially aware, and we know how to make an occasion special."

During the summer, New England nuptials included dozens of civil unions and gay weddings in the states where they're already legal. So far, in all three states, the majority of couples have been women, according to state officials who track marriage and civil union records. They included a large percentage of travelers from out of state.

— Vermont. Since 2000, more than 8,000 same-sex couples have taken advantage of the statute, according to the state's department of health. A gamut of venues — ranging from posh inns to four-room B&Bs and from small-town Stowe to more urban Burlington — organize complete civil union packages. Many couples opt for four- to 20-room inns, which can house all the guests and stage the ceremony and reception.

— Massachusetts. More than 10,000 gay and lesbian couples have married in the state since 2004. Provincetown, long one of the most beloved gay summer escapes, has become the "it" place for marriage. More than 1,800 gay couples have registered to exchange vows in the seaside resort town, by the account of town hall authorities. In recent years, P'town has attracted more lesbians than gay men, more vacationers in their 30s and older than 20-somethings, and more folks wheeling around in BMWs than Fords.

But a well-organized group of wedding vendors — including inns offering packages, bands, bakers and DJs — can make just about any style or size occasion happen. A ceremony on Boston Harbor Island, including a clambake, is one of several options offered by It's About Time, a Boston agency that specializes in same-sex ceremonies. That celebration costs about \$50 a person.

— Connecticut. Since the state began allowing civil unions in 2005, more than 1,500 couples have taken advantage of the option. The cities of New Haven, Hartford and Greenwich are the most popular settings for ceremonies, according to state tourism officials.

The posh Wake Robin Inn in Lakeville, the Sheraton Hartford and the Hartford Marriott Farmington are hotels promoting civil union packages. In its civil union packages, the Wake Robin charges start at \$35 a person for rehearsal dinners and \$99 a person for celebration dinners.

Indeed, with the vast variety of cities, towns and individual venues throughout New England, there is a setting for just about any imaginable style of same-sex wedding or civil union.

"Each of the states in the region is different, and every place offers a different atmosphere or ceremony package," said Newman, the Highlands Inn owner. "It's refreshing that same-sex couples who want an official ceremony now have so many choices."



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A COMMITMENT CEREMONY at Highlands Inn in Bethlehem, N.H. In the past few years, an extensive network of accommodations welcoming homosexual travelers has opened in New Hampshire's rustic villages and other locales.

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